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Collaboration Among Partner Agencies of the United Way of Broome County

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COLLABORATION AMONG PARTNER AGENCIES OF
THE UNITED WAY OF BROOME COUNTY

BY

STEPHEN LOUIS CAPOBIANCO

BA, Binghamton University, 2011

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Masters in Public Administration in the Graduate School of
Binghamton University
State University of New York
2012

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Accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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2012

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Executive Summary

The United Way of Broome County emphasizes the importance of organizational collaboration and resource sharing among its partner agencies. However, the United Way of Broome County does not know specifically how partner agencies collaborate with each other, nor does it fully understand the barriers that these nonprofit agencies face with regards to these collaborative efforts.

To assist the United Way of Broome County with the aforementioned problem, telephone interviews were conducted with eight randomly selected program directors within the building block of health in order to better understand how partner agencies collaborate and barriers they may face when collaborating. Six main findings emerged from the data. First, partner agencies in the building block of health collaborate with each other by offering joint programs, giving presentations, sharing space and giving referrals. Second, the main reason for a partner agency to work with another is to gain access to a target population and to its facilities. Third, meetings to exchange ideas and learn about other agencies are vital to establish collaborative efforts among partner agencies. Fourth, not knowing what other partner agencies do is a barrier to collaboration. Fifth, competition among partner agencies is an additional barrier to collaboration. Lastly, time, staffing and additional funding necessary for establishing and running collaborative projects are other barriers to collaboration.

The above findings resulted in four recommendations the United Way of Broome County may choose to implement. These recommendations include creating an online forum for partner agencies, distributing a newsletter to let partners know what other partners are doing, offering one grant to agencies working on a similar program and/or issue, and offering a one-time grant

that would encourage cost-sharing initiatives. The United Way of Broome County can use these recommendations to help create more conducive environments to collaboration in the future.

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Problem Definition

The United Way of Broome County raises funds each year from the community to fund specific programs that help people in Broome County. The United Way of Broome County works with 30 partner agencies and in 2011 supported 61 programs in what the United Way of Broome County considers the building blocks for a good life education, income and health. Recently, the United Way of Broome County has transformed its organizational structure to the new Community Capacity Building model, moving away from the traditional Social Services model (Advancing the Common Good, p. 6). As part of this shift the United Way of Broome County emphasizes in its Community Investment Strategy Report 2010-2012, “the importance of organizational collaboration and resource sharing” (p. 6). This new model posits that the United Way of Broome County should collaborate with its partner agencies in order to be effective with its investments and create the most profound impact. This capstone project specifically focuses on the collaboration of partner agencies that receive funding for health programs.

The United Way of Broome County currently only asks for information about partner agency collaboration only on its program funding application. The information it collects on this application is limited. There is a section of the program funding application entitled “Collaboration and Sustainability” where partner agencies must answer the following questions: “What other agencies in Broome County will you be coordinating your program with? Do you have plans to coordinate your program with those agencies?” A summary of the responses can be found below in Table 1. In applications for funding for programs under the building block of health for the 2011 calendar year, there were 31 funded applications. Of those applications, only two program applications gave detailed descriptions of partner agency collaboration. Five program applications listed partner agencies, but did not give specific examples. Another five

listed both partner and non-partner agencies, but also gave no specific examples. One of these agencies stated that they would like to begin a collaboration process and that it is in the early planning stages of development. Fifteen out of the 31 program applications identified non-partner agencies as collaborators. For example, many of the agencies in this category identified local government agencies, schools and health care providers. However, these entities were either alternative funders or entities with which they exchange referrals. Only two out of those fifteen gave detailed descriptions of their collaborations with non-partner agencies. Lastly, four program applications indicated that they do not collaborate at all, with one stating: “At this time, we have no specific plans to further our coordination with these [partner] agencies. However, we do have positive relationships with these agencies and have collaborated in the past.”

Table 1: Responses to a question in the program funding application

“What other agencies in Broome County will you be coordinating your program with?”	Number of agencies responding similarly
Detailed description of partner agency collaboration	2
Listed partner agencies, but gave no examples	5
Listed both partner and non-partner agencies, but gave no examples	5
Identified non-partner agencies as collaborators	15 (2 gave detailed descriptions)
Do not collaborate at all	4

The United Way of Broome County is committed to helping its partners achieve their programs’ goals in the building blocks of education, income and health. As stated in the “Advancing the Common Good: United Way of Broome County Community Investment Strategy 2010-2012,” “now more than ever, United Way must take every step possible to ensure

that the limited resources available are put to the greatest good” (p. 9). In order to do so, the United Way of Broome County asserts that “improving service coordination, cost-sharing/shared services, and better use of existing resources are all issues local non-profit agencies should be exploring” (p. 9). Therefore, it is in the United Way of Broome County’s interest to see how its partner agencies are doing with regards to this type of collaboration as stated in the Community Investment Strategy Report. Once the United Way of Broome County knows which partner agencies collaborate and how, it can then target the ones who do not and work on finding ways to reduce barriers to possible collaboration.

There are increasing calls for more efficient and lean non-profit organizations that can respond to the rapidly changing environments in which they provide services. The United Way of Broome County is not alone in needing to make sure that their limited resources are being used adequately and efficiently. Collaboration has been touted in many areas of public and non-profit administration as a tool to adapt to the social, political, and economic times that the United States is facing (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Better understanding of the barriers to nonprofit collaboration can help non-profit administrators create environments more conducive to collaboration in the future. This capstone project will attempt to answer the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. For funded programs within the building block of health, how do the partner agencies of the United Way of Broome County collaborate with other partner agencies?

2. For the partner agencies that are currently working together, what barriers, if any, are there to collaboration?

Literature Review

In this literature review I will discuss the definition of collaboration and the continuum on which collaborative efforts may fall. Also, I will provide an overview of the different theories of collaboration in the nonprofit sector, as well as barriers to collaboration.

What is collaboration?

There are various scholarly definitions for collaboration, but for the purpose of this study I will use the definition provided by Chrislip and Larson (1994):

It is a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties who work toward common goals by sharing knowledge and information (communication) and more than a relationship that helps each party achieve its own goals (cooperation and coordination). The purpose of collaboration is to create a shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party. (p. 5)

Nonprofit collaboration occurs when two or more nonprofit organizations work together through joint efforts, shared resources, and collective decision-making in order to develop a shared service or product to solve a common problem (Guo & Acar, 2005; Sowa, 2009).

Several scholars suggest that collaboration occurs on a continuum of three points, namely, a) cooperation, in which agencies have an understanding of each other while pursuing independent goals, b) coordination, in which there is some level of joint work for shared goals and c) collaboration, where partners have fully shared services, expertise and resources (Chaudry, Polivka, Kennedy, 2010; Tseng, Liu, Wang, 2011; Sowa, 2008). It is also possible to

extend the continuum to contact, cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and convergence (Waibel & Erway, 2009). Contact is the opening of dialogue between partners and is added in the beginning of the continuum. On the other hand convergence is placed at the end, in which “collaboration has become so extensive, engrained, and assumed that it is no longer recognized as a collaborative undertaking” (Waibel & Erway, 2009). Convergence is also known as “service integration,” where more than one organization works in conjunction to provide services for the same group (Sowa, 2008). The risks, benefits, investment and loss of autonomy all increase as the level of the collaborative effort moves from contact to convergence (Tseng, Liu, Wang, 2011; Waibel & Erway, 2009).

Theories of collaboration in the nonprofit sector

Collaboration in the nonprofit sector has been studied extensively and the idea of “collaboration is nothing new” (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The social sector has many different types of partnerships, networks, and joint efforts (Snaveley & Tracy, 2002). However, it can be difficult to define these “noncontractual relationships, as the ‘glue’ binding them together can take many forms (eg. statutory, financial, relational)” (Gazley, 2008, p. 150).

There is no single theory can be used to adequately explain the motivations behind nonprofit collaboration (Sowa, 2009). Theories that have been used to explain why nonprofits collaborate include: resource dependency, institutional theory and networks (Guo & Acar, 2005). Resource dependency theory claims “organizations will react to pressures in their external environment to secure the resources needed for survival” (David & Zakus, 1998, p. 475). Many scholars suggest that organizations collaborate in order to obtain financial resources otherwise unattainable independently (Snaveley & Tracy, 2002; Sowa, 2009). Resource dependency

emphasizes the idea that collaboration offers security for organizations to secure funds, as well as, reduces uncertainty in the current environment (Sowa, 2009; Guo & Acar, 2005). Institutional theory posits that nonprofit organizations develop collaborations due to institutional pressures, like mandates from higher authorities (Guo & Acar, 2005). Nonprofits may also want to strengthen their organization and gain expertise in order to accomplish their respective missions (Snively & Tracy, 2002; Sowa, 2009). The network perspective highlights the social aspects of collaboration, such as trust, willingness to collaborate and previous history of collaboration (Guo & Acar, 2005; Sowa, 2009). Network theories have been valuable when used to explain the reasons for successful collaborations (Gazley, 2010a). The next step in understanding the collaboration between nonprofits is examining the barriers posed to such collaborative activities.

What are the barriers to collaboration?

Scholarly research identifies several possible barriers to collaborative efforts by nonprofit organizations. When nonprofits decide to collaborate with each other, it is possible that their activities could be limited by differing missions or goals, not enough funds or staff and unwillingness of partners to share information or resources (Gazley, 2010b). Other barriers to collaboration can occur due to loss of autonomy or accountability, taking over an organization, greater financial instability and difficulty in performance evaluation (Gazley and Brudney, 2007). Also, research has shown that lack of sufficient staff, awareness, institutional time and financial support to pursue collaborative relationships can be barriers (Polivka, Kennedy & Chaudry, 1997; Gazley & Brudney, 2007).

There is an extensive amount of scholarly research on collaboration between nonprofits and the business sector and between nonprofits and public agencies. However, there is a lack of

literature on the collaborative efforts of nonprofits receiving funding from a common non-governmental source. My research will help to fill in that gap in the literature by looking at how nonprofit partner agencies of the United Way of Broome County collaborate with each other. The following section describes the methods used in this research.

Methodology

Data Collection

To examine the collaboration between partner agencies of United Way of Broome County and possible barriers to that collaboration, I conducted telephone interviews with program directors of funded partners. I randomly selected ten program directors from the 43 funded programs within the building block of health to interview. Eight agreed to participate. Prior to data collection, I received approval from the Human Subjects Research Review Committee at Binghamton University to ensure that I used sound ethical practices (See Appendix A). I chose to interview the program directors of the different partner agencies within the building block of health because they are directly involved with the funded programs of the partner agencies of United Way of Broome County. I decided to use interviews instead of a quantitative technique because I wanted detailed information on the ways partner agencies collaborate with each other and barriers that they face. A qualitative approach allowed me to ask follow up questions. It also permitted me to identify key patterns within the interviews. The rationale for using random selection is that this method made it more likely that the interviewees would be more representative of the partner agencies in the building block of health than if I chose from a list. I also did not have the time to interview each program director.

I sent all interviewees an initial email asking whether they would like to participate in the telephone interview on organizational collaboration. I asked each program director eleven open-

ended questions regarding their collaboration with other partner agencies and barriers to those collaborations. I included questions regarding specific existing collaborations, how could they create additional collaborations, barriers to additional collaborations and what the United Way of Broome County could do to encourage collaboration. The use of open-ended questions allowed each interviewee to elaborate on their specific collaborations and what their particular challenges were. I guaranteed interviewees' confidentiality by stressing that I would keep their response confidential and not report with identifiers. Their interviews took approximately 20-30 minutes depending on the length of the interviewees' answers. I took notes on my computer while I conducted the interviews.

Strengths & Limitations

A significant strength of this research is the interactive nature of the interview process. Because I conducted interviews, I was able to answer any inquiries that the interviewee may have had regarding my research or the actual questions. As I stated before, I also was able to ask whatever probing questions were necessary, which allowed my analysis to be more flexible. The most significant threat to my research was the possible tendency of the interviewees to respond to questions in a manner that would be viewed favorable by others. This could have lead to program directors embellishing their collaborations. I minimized this threat by keeping the interviews confidential and removing identifiers from the data analysis. I explained this to the interviewees before I conducted each interview. Another limitation to this study is that the experiences of my interviewees may not be representative of the experiences of all programs in the building block of health. I minimized this limitation by randomly selecting the interviewees.

To minimize the threat of unclear or biased wording in my interview questions, a Capstone committee professor and site supervisor reviewed the interview protocol.

Data Analysis

To analyze the telephone interview results, I looked for specific themes in the interviewees' responses to my questions. I searched for patterns within the interviewees' responses regarding their current collaborations and possible challenges with their existing and possible future collaborations. These aforementioned coding themes led to each of my finding statements.

Findings

Based on the thematic analysis of the interviewees' responses, I have identified several findings related to the research questions. They include findings about existing collaborations and why they develop, challenges and barriers faced with existing collaborations, and possible additional collaborative efforts in the future.

Finding #1: Partner agencies in the building block of health collaborate with each other by offering joint programs, making presentations, sharing space and giving referrals.

Partner agencies collaborate in a variety of ways. Joint projects with other partner agencies were discussed first with all of the interviewees. Five of the eight interviewees indicated that they offered joint programs with other partner agencies. One interviewee stated that, "we coordinate and share services that we are offering with [another partner agency]." Two interviewees stated that besides offering programs for clients of both agencies their agencies

gave presentations about their programs for staff of other agencies. One of these interviewees said, “our staff attends presentations on their programs and we go and present our programs there.” In addition, five of the eight interviewees indicated that they provide referrals to other partner agencies. For example, one partner agency program director said, “we send a lot of our clients to these other organizations.” Finally, two interviewees stated that their agency offers space to other partner agencies. One of these participants told me that, “we will give [the other partner agency] huge discounts or just give them the space because many [clients] overlap with us, we let them use our space.”

Finding #2: The main reason for a partner agency to work with another is to gain access to its facilities and to a target population.

Six of the eight interviewees stated that either the other partner agency has access to the population that they want to serve and/or accessible facilities for collaboration. For instance, an interviewee said, “the services that we offer and the population that we need to offer them to match” with the other partner agency. Another one of these six interviewees stated that “[the other partner agency] has fully accessible facilities and are more open to work with another nonprofit group than the for-profits are.” Along with this idea of access is the “similarity in services and complementary services,” which one interviewee specified as when their agency is able to offer services to the same population when the other cannot and vice versa.

Finding #3: Meetings to exchange ideas and learn about other agencies are vital to establishing collaborative efforts among partner agencies.

Each of the eight partner agency program directors mentioned in their interview that in establishing their collaborations they begin the process by meeting and exchanging ideas for possible collaborations. They expressed that it is imperative to learn about other agencies in order to establish contact and a connection so collaborative efforts can grow. I asked the participants questions about how their existing collaborations began and the impact they have on their organization's operations. In response to these questions, three of the eight interviewees used the exact words, "to share ideas back and forth." In response to a question about what the United Way of Broome County can do to encourage additional collaborations, a participant said, "keep bringing us together because when we are together we talk more and get more ideas."

Another interviewee said:

We are always willing to sit down at the table to learn about what others are doing in the community to identify other ways to collaborate. We are always willing to come to the table with an open mind. There are a variety of needs in the community and no one can meet them all, if you sit down you can come up with ideas. It would be helpful if [the United Way of Broome County] had a professional network, a place for professionals to communicate.

Another participant did express the desire that meetings be on a specific issue and include "one-on-one meetings for specific programs."

Finding #4: Not knowing what other partner agencies do is a barrier to collaboration.

While the previous finding emphasizes the importance of meetings between partner agencies to establish collaborative efforts, seven of the eight interviewees also indicated that they did not know what programs other partner agencies were running. One participant even told me,

“I am not sure what agency is a partner agency.” Four of these seven reported that an obstacle to their agency’s current collaborations is that they do not know who to refer to in the community because they do not know what others are doing. For example, one interviewee said an obstacle is, “not knowing what the other agencies are doing in relation to us, there are a lot of agencies in this community and it is a challenge to know who is the best person to refer to.” One partner agency program director finds establishing collaborative efforts difficult because “other agencies make assumptions about what we do without all of the details and it may take a little work to get an agency to understand what we do.” To address these barriers to collaboration, three out of the eight interviewees suggested that the United Way of Broome County utilize technology to facilitate conversations and collaborative efforts.

Finding #5: Competition among partner agencies is an additional barrier to collaboration.

Four of the eight participants expressed that competition among the partner agencies is a major barrier for collaboration. For example, one partner agency program director said that, “a barrier is that sometimes the partner agency doesn’t want to collaborate back.” Another participant stated, “organizations can become territorial over data” and believe that, “agencies must be willing to share data so that everyone can benefit to the fullest.” This participant suggested that there is a fear “if [directors] are sharing then they might not get enough credit.” These four participants explained that the reluctance to collaborate and fear of losing credit stem from the competition for resources. One participant told me, “organizations get scared that others may steal their funding because funding is what makes us all go ‘round, we are all going after the same group of resources, for the same pot.” Another stated that, “there is the understanding that [the other partner agencies] want to help you do this better or you can help [the other partner

agencies] to do this better, but everyone wants something for it.” The interviewee continued by saying, “the funding is so tight that no one can do something for free.”

Finding #6: Finding the time, staffing and additional funding necessary for establishing and running collaborative projects are other barriers to collaboration.

Interviewees mentioned other important barriers to collaboration. Five out of the eight interviewees stated that there was not enough time and staff available for collaboration. When responding to a question about the challenges experienced when collaborating with other partner agencies, one interviewee told me, “since everyone is stretched very thin it makes it difficult and with such limited resources it is hard to communicate effectively.” Six of the eight interviewees also stated that funding was a barrier to collaboration. One participant told me very frankly that “there is less funding available to do collaborative things.” One participant suggested a solution to these barriers would be by having “a centralized office space, especially in Binghamton where real estate is very inexpensive.” This program director says that the United Way of Broome County or another “centralized organization that has the capital” could purchase this space and make “operational money from the building where nonprofits would pay rent” and “we could cut down on expenses by sharing services and supplies.”

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to better understand how the United Way of Broome County’s partner agencies within the building block of health collaborate with each other and what the barriers to such collaborations may be. The findings of my study will help provide greater insight into how partner agencies collaborate and what challenges they face in existing

and developing collaborations. After analyzing data from the telephone interviews with program directors of funded partner agencies, I have developed four recommendations for the United Way of Broome County.

Recommendation #1: Create an online forum for partner agencies to help stimulate ideas about possible collaborations and to raise issues and challenges.

All eight interviewees indicated that they start the collaboration process by meeting and exchanging ideas for possible collaborations with potential partners. In order to facilitate this process, I recommend that the United Way of Broome County create an online forum to give partner agencies the chance to discuss potential collaboration opportunities. By having an online forum operated by the United Way of Broome County, partner agencies will be able to post and interact with each other without having to leave their offices. Since time and staffing can be an obstacle to collaborating, this will allow staff to use available free time to communicate, instead of having a forced meeting time. An online forum can create virtual meetings for partners to exchange ideas, which is vital to collaboration as expressed in the findings of this study. Having a forum where professionals can communicate would enhance the network between partner agencies.

Recommendation #2: Distribute a partner newsletter to let partners know what other partners are doing including what projects and programs they are currently working on.

My findings also show that a major barrier to collaboration is that partner agencies often do not know about other partners' programs and projects. I recommend that the United Way of Broome County collect information about current and/or upcoming projects and programs that

the partner agencies in the different building blocks are doing and then compile this information in a newsletter exclusively for partner agencies. This may help develop additional collaborations, which is an aim of the United Way of Broome County.

Recommendation #3: Offer one grant to agencies working on a similar program and/or issue.

According to my findings, another key barrier to collaboration is competition among partner agencies. Therefore, I recommend that when the United Way of Broome County is reviewing proposals from partner agencies, it should consider offering one grant to agencies working on a similar program/issue in order to encourage collaboration. This study shows partners feel a competition for resources; one grant would force partners to collaborate together and drastically reduce competition. It would help foster a more collaborative working culture and support teamwork among partner agencies.

Recommendation #4: Offer a one-time grant that encourages cost-sharing initiatives.

Since the findings of this study illustrate the issue that funding is often a barrier to developing additional collaborations, a unique way to lower costs and foster collaborative efforts would be for the United Way of Broome County to offer a one-time grant that would encourage cost-sharing initiatives. For example, the United Way of Broome County could help encourage the partner agencies that want to centralize administrative tasks, which could help reduce overhead costs for each nonprofit partner agency. This study shows that having the necessary funds to communicate effectively is difficult. Therefore if partner agencies were given funds to come up with a less costly way to communicate, more collaboration could occur.

Conclusion

Collaboration among partner agencies of the United Way of Broome County is a key priority of the organization. It is therefore imperative that the United Way of Broome County knows how its partner agencies collaborate and the challenges associated with such efforts. The findings and recommendations that emerged from this study may be used to assist the United Way of Broome County to better understanding how partner agencies collaborate within the building block of health, as well as the barriers that they face to their collaborative efforts.

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Appendix A**IRB Approval Letter**

Date: March 9, 2012

To: Stephen Capobianco, DPA

From: Anne M. Casella, CIP Administrator
Human Subjects Research Review Committee

Subject: Human Subjects Research Approval
Protocol Number: 1932-12
Protocol title: *United Way of Broome County Partner Agency Collaboration*

Your project identified above was reviewed by the HSRRC and has received an Exempt approval pursuant to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations, 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) .

An exempt status signifies that you will not be required to submit a Continuing Review application as long as your project involving human subjects remains unchanged. If your project undergoes any changes these changes must be reported to our office prior to implementation, using the form listed below:

http://humansubjects.binghamton.edu/2009_Forms/012_Modification%20Form.rtf

Principal Investigators or any individual involved in the research must report any problems involving the conduct of the study or subject participation. Any problems involving recruitment and consent processes or any deviations from the approved protocol should be reported in writing within five (5) business days as outlined in Binghamton University, Human Subjects Research Review Office, Policy and Procedures IX.F.1 Unanticipated Problems/adverse events/complaints. We also require that the following form be submitted:

<http://humansubjects.binghamton.edu/Forms/Forms/Adverse%20Event%20Form.rtf>

University policy requires you to maintain as a part of your records, any documents pertaining to the use of human subjects in your research. This includes any information or materials conveyed to, and received from, the subjects, as well as any executed consent forms, data and analysis results. These records must be maintained for at least six years after project completion or termination. If this is a funded project, you should be aware that these records are subject to inspection and review by authorized representative of the University, State and Federal governments.

Please notify this office when your project is complete by completing and forwarding to our office the following form:

<http://humansubjects.binghamton.edu/Forms/Forms/Protocol%20Closure%20Form.rtf>

Upon notification we will close the above referenced file. Any reactivation of the project will require a new application.

This documentation is being provided to you via email. A hard copy will not be mailed unless you request us to do so.

Thank you for your cooperation, I wish you success in your research, and please do not hesitate to contact our office if you have any questions or require further assistance.

cc: file

Diane Bulizak, Secretary

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Appendix B**Telephone Interview Instrument**

1. Please tell me about your agency's existing collaborations with...
 - a) any partner agency.
 - b) any partner agency within the building block of health.
2. Why did you decide to collaborate with these specific agencies?
3. How did you develop these collaborations?
4. What, if any, impact have these collaborations have on your agency and it's operations?
5. What challenges, if any, have you experienced when collaborating with these agencies?
6. In what areas do you think partner agencies in the building block of health could collaborate?
7. Please describe your organization's willingness to develop additional collaborations with...
 - a) partner agencies.
 - b) partner agencies within the building block of health.
8. What are the challenges, if any, to developing these additional collaborations?
9. Please describe any other barriers to collaboration.
10. To what extent have you been successful in overcoming any of these barriers?
11. What, if anything, can the United Way do to encourage collaboration?